

The California Disease & Other Killers...Immigrant Women

Volume 4 Number 5 \$2.95

The Californians

THE MAGAZINE OF CALIFORNIA HISTORY

The Last Vaqueros



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PRICE
L \$ 2.95

The Last Vaqueros

A woman's intimate recollections revive the unique characters of six horsemen from *el tiempo antiguo*, who once rode in the Santa Cruz Island *corridas*.

By Helen Caire

These sketches are published in the present tense, as written on Santa Cruz Island many years ago, with a few additions and changes due to the passage of time in which the first cowboy of the Americas — the vaquero — has disappeared into ranching history.

For three generations vaqueros have been riding on the Island. Every spring they come for the yearly *corrida* (roundup) of sheep. Most of them are Barbareños, born in or near Santa Barbara of Mexican-Californian stock, often with a dash of Indian. Their best ropers also come for the cattle roundups. But now the number of vaqueros is decreasing. Their sons do not follow the old work but instead migrate to cities. They have lost entirely the spirit of the older vaqueros. The young take other paths; the old have very nearly come to the end of theirs. In another generation the vaquero, in California at least, will become a ghostly rider on a phantom trail. For that reason I am jotting down sketches of a few about whom legend still repeats stories.

Fierce and uncouth, even rather frightening at the end of a roundup season, some of these oldtimers might seem to greenhorns. The vaquero's get-up consists of a blue shirt and jeans, a knife stuck in his belt in a leather sheath and a worn old hat. He knots a red or blue cotton bandana around his neck. The vaquero's tools are a good horse and a *reata*, the rawhide lariat coiled and tied near the saddle horn.

The vaqueros arrive on the schooner *San-*



Vaquero Dominguez of Santa Cruz Island, "splendid with the *reata*".

ta Cruz at Prisoners' Harbor, the Island's main port, about 25 miles due south of Santa Barbara. Most of them step on the wharf clean-shaved or perhaps with a mustache, but as time goes on, many let their whiskers grow. This gives certain ones a wild look, but to a few a rather patriarchal appearance.

Jose Espinosa was the kingpin of vaqueros, barring none. I can only remember him when he was called *El Viejo*, The Old One, but those who had seen him in his prime

vouched for his outstanding skill. As young man Jose had been very handsome and as crafty as old Reynard himself. Teamed with Ulysses, he would have whipped the world. Not a living soul could pull the wool over old Jose's black, piercing eyes, hawk eyes that could sight anything in line of vision, no matter how far.

And Jose with at *reata* — there was a roper! Like all fine ropers, he never threw the lasso till he was sure of his aim. He didn't rope so gracefully as some, but his *reata* went whirring out straight as a die to its mark. I can still see him one day in a large

corral working cattle, sitting his horse loosely, watching, watching, smiling with mocking malice at a miss, and cutting in with a neat, straight throw at the calf himself.

Jose had other talents. He had such a knowledge of medicinal herbs that all the *paisanos* had unquestioning faith in his skill at healing. Once my sister Didi's sleek little bay mare had a small saddle sore on her back that even a good rider's saddle would rub open again. Didi was very distressed because she would not be able to ride Perla for several weeks that summer. When she told Jose about it, he nodded knowingly and, with an "I'll fix it.", led the mare away. The next day Perla's sore spot was healed. Didi's brown eyes opened wide. "Jose, how did you ever cure it?" "I got up two, three times

last night..." the old vaquero admitted, then allowed himself the trace of a smile and kept the secret of his cure.

One summer when we were young children, the workmen teased my cousin Justy by telling him fantastic yarns, such as "Put a horsehair in water for awhile and it'll turn into a snake." At that time, Justy happened to have several warts on his hands. One of the vaqueros suggested that he should ask Jose for a cure. So Justy went to the former *mayordomo* for a remedy. Jose looked at his hands, then said, "Some night, light a fire. Hold a handful of rock salt in your left hand. Then put the first finger of your right hand in your ear. Drop the salt into the fire and quickly stop up your left ear with the hand that held the salt, before you can hear the fire crackle. Then run as

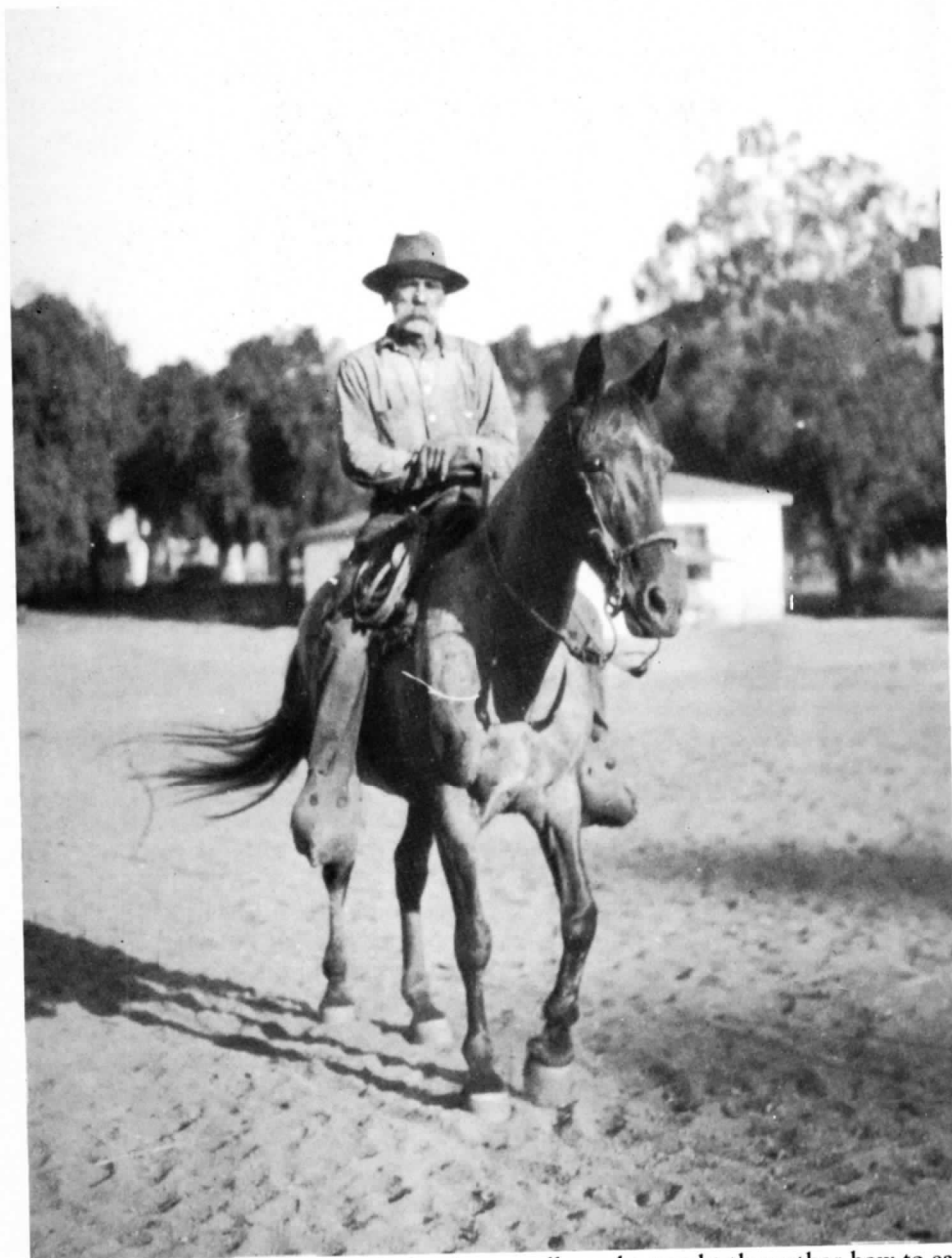
fast as you can for about 50 yards and come back. If the fire is not crackling, your warts will come off; if it is, they will stay."

One day in the saddle shop we were looking at the side saddles on racks, one above the other behind a burlap curtain. They'd been used by my mother and aunts years ago and now we decided to try them. We took a trail up the Colorados, and I remember coming down the steep ridge behind the almond orchard, laughing and chatting about how much more comfortable it was to ride astride than with one leg around the doubly curved pommel and the other foot in the dainty stirrup. Later, when my sister Jeanne was talking to Jose, he recalled olden times, praising the equestrian skill of two of our aunts who rode the roughest Island trails on side saddles. The Old One shook his head, marveling at their horsemanship, he who was seldom lavish in praise of anyone even though he was gallant and courteous in sweeping off his hat and making courtly bows to the ladies. Sometimes he would bring in wild flowers from the hills and present them to my mother or aunts with a deep bow and a flourish. But this same elegant and gracious Jose could lash a man when aroused.

A more ruthless and harder-working *mayordomo* there never was on the Island than this lone wolf. He kept aloof from the other vaqueros and spoke in a friendly way to only a few. A veritable slave driver on the *corridas*, Jose was so feared by the men that they would blame each other for the loss of sheep when he accused them. Then the *mayordomo* would lash the whole gang of vaqueros "with the valor of his tongue", and on one occasion he actually did flay a man with his *chirrión* (short rawhide quirt) — behavior not approved by the Caire family.

When in a rage, he bared his teeth, giving him a fierce and feline expression. When Jose bared his teeth, the vaqueros stepped lively. He worked like a cyclone on the ranges, was everywhere, saw everything — but though the men feared him they rebelled in their hearts. Although they worked like Trojans when Jose's black, piercing eyes were on them, they made up for it when he was out of sight. Jose seemed hardest on his younger brother Cuate, sending him as lead man over the most difficult territory — why, nobody ever knew.

His sense of humor sometimes revealed a ruthlessness. Once while working cattle, he had picked up the hind legs of a large, mean-looking calf and his brother Cuate had the head. When it was time to let the calf up, Jose slackened his taut *reata* somewhat, and told the medicine boy to take off the noose. The lad drew back, afraid. Jose



Juan Cuate, vaquero, horse-breaker and story-teller, who taught the author how to eat prickly pear cactus.

angrily ordered him to do so. The boy obeyed, but that mean steer just lay on the ground.

"Twist his tail," commanded Jose.

Again the boy hesitated. Then Jose fiercely bared his teeth, terrifying the lad into obedience. One twist was sufficient: the steer furiously charged at the boy, who just made the fence in time. When he looked back, Jose was chuckling.

Jose was also famous at hunting. There never was a wild hog that Jose set out to get that escaped. And he never used a gun: his *reata* and knife were sufficient. Jose would sight a *coche* far across a canyon on another ridge and spur his horse after it tirelessly. When everyone in the group was willing to say, "That one's gone," Jose would gallop up or down and invariably meet the hog

the age of 86. One hopes he rides happily in Eternity.

Cuate, rather old when we came to know him, seemed even older than he was. His name was Juan but he was always called "Twin", though his birthmate had died as a baby. Though he would arrive at the Island with a haircut and mustache, he apparently considered the services of his *compadre* who acted as barber unnecessary. Short and slight, with a shock of coarse gray hair, soup-strainer mustache and grizzled whiskers that rendered his lingo almost incomprehensible at times, Cuate appeared a somewhat bleary-eyed cross between *paisano* and a statue of St. Joseph.

In his youth, my father and the young Cuate had often gone hunting together and practiced roping. Cuate, never a top-notch vaquero but nevertheless a great storyteller, related these past experiences to us in his thin, rather hoarse voice — stories of the races he had miraculously won as a jockey, of hunting adventures, of horse "gen'ling", or experiences on the *corridos*, of olden days on the Island. When we were youngsters my father sometimes sent Cuate to guide us on long rides over the steep, chaparral-flanked trails. Cuate only needed an audience to get started.

At the time my grandfather Justinian Caire acquired the Island, several mules were used as pack animals. Probably only the road to Prisoners' Harbor was good: from the Main ranch, a four-horse team

One of the author's father's vaqueros, in the main ranch barnyard on Santa Cruz Island.



coming around the way he had taken. Then he would throw out his rawhide lariat and rope the pinto or black *coche* with uncanny neatness. This requires great skill, for a hog, particularly a razorback, is one of the hardest animals in the world to rope. On one memorable day, my father saw him get 21. (Although an excellent *raconteur*, Frederic Caire did not go in for fabricating tall tales.)

There is no doubt that Jose was one of the best riders, ropers and all-around vaqueros in California. Tough, canny, hard-driving, he rode almost up to his death at

Cuate owned a dog called Tiempo (because he was quick as a flash) whom he loved almost as a child; where you saw Cuate riding, there was the little brindle Tiempo trotting behind the horse or held up on the saddle. When Tiempo died, Cuate wrapped him in a brand new sweater and dug a grave for him on a knoll behind the Main Ranch's kitchen and mess hall. My father gave Cuate a young pepper tree to plant on Tiempo's grave. When Cuate told us about this later, tears filled his sad, faded eyes.

with a very skillful driver took all day on the old Camino del Carro to Christy at the west end, for much of the road followed the ridgeline of the Colorados.

"They wuz one mule that usta open gates," Cuate began one day in his thin, low voice as we sat around a barbecue fire in the Canada Laguna. "No madda w'ere they pud 'im, he can always open that gate an' get out. You never know w'ere you gonna find him." Our driftwood fire, crackling and tangy, was in the creek bed near sally trees, not far from the lagoon that gives the can-

yon its name. The fresh water sustained grassy stretches around it.

"He wuz smart, that mule," Cuate continued. "One time we wuz at Christy brandin' cattle, an' that mule wuz in a corral with a good lock onna gate." Cuate's deep-set eyes almost disappeared in wrinkles when he chuckled. He turned his barbecue stick so that the meat might roast on the other side. "Well, we wuz gettin' ready to go back to the Main Ranch, but — w're's that mule? Preddy soon Don Justinian — your grandfather — he phones from the Main Ranch — The mule's there! He open' that gate that night and walked all a way back, an' he goes inna stable, inna stall an' he's munchin' hay! That mule, he's

this slightly sweet, thirst-quenching fruit. This particular patch, always thereafter referred to as "Cuate's cactus", produces the largest and juiciest fruit of any *Opuntia* cactus on the Island. Other patches of the same variety bear fruit of average size, as do those of the red-flowering *Opuntia* which give red tunas.

Cuate's cactus grows in a vast Indian mound. As we started on the way to the beach of Cueva Valdez, our boots were powdered with fine *rancheria* dust, glistening with bits of shell. Long before, the Chumash Indians must have cherished this cactus patch.

Besides being a vaquero, Cuate was also a horse-breaker. His method was "gen'ling"

tone: "Bah-loon, some day I'm gon' keel you," but he never even made her walk any faster.

One summer Cuate was gen'ling bay mare with good gaits; she was quick and light, and Didi very much wanted to ride her. She wheedled beguilingly, but my father still shook his head. "When Cuate has finished breaking her, you can ride her." And he cautioned the old vaquero that she was not to ride Campana till "you say she is safe." Cuate promised. Didi's insistent pleas, her vivid face earnest ("Cuate, you know I can ride her!"), brought only an apologetic smile and shaking of his head. But a short time later, a guest riding a horse's length ahead of my sister lost her hat in a gust of wind. Didi spurred her horse and, at a lope, picked up the hat. Cuate, on his way to or from some errand such as checking a waterhole or fencing a pasture, saw Didi from a distance. He went to my father, his face crinkling into a smile, and said, "Senor, the Senorita Delfina can ride Campana."

Always gentle-hearted and soft-spoken when sober, Cuate became ugly and took to knives and quarrels when "drink and the devil" had done for him. It took a strong arm to drag this wisp of a demon off to his bunk. But this was not the real Cuate; the scapular he always wore was more than a token, evidence of the real faith in his heart. *Vaya con Dios*, Cuate.

Garcia rode on the Island roundups for many decades. He plays the guitar with great skill and gusto and, despite his gray hair and beard, dances lively Spanish steps. A certain verve, even in his old age, makes him hold his back straight with the young.

One evening during the roundup, when a clear full moon was shining over the dark skyline of eucalyptus and flooding the Canada del Medio with a silvery light, the vaqueros were sitting on a bench in front of the adobe bunkhouse after the day's work. Pedro softly twanged his guitar, singing old Spanish ditties; several other voices chimed in pleasantly. The age-old songs carried on the warm evening air.

Once Garcia, his son and grandson all rode on the Island roundups. But the grandson left the vaquero life as all the present generation has. Only the son still rides, for Garcia is at last too full of years to mount a horse and swing a *reata*. He lives in town and has just married a buxom wife.

Then there was Lugo who, because of his unusual skill, was made *mayordomo* one year. When in the mood for a lark on a good horse, "Vamos!" he would shout. "Let's gallop!" and with a laugh he'd be off,



An unidentified Santa Cruz Island vaquero.

smarder en a lodd people." The old vaquero shook his head, laughing softly.

One day Cuate was with us on a long ride to Cueva Valdez Cove on the northern coast. Reaching a high mesa overlooking the channel, we dismounted near an enormous round cactus patch. "I'm gonna show you somethin'." Cuate was pulling his knife out of its leather sheath as he walked toward the cactus. "These are the best tunas on the Island." Skillfully he cut off and pierced with the point of his knife a very large, light yellow prickly pear. He let it drop, and with the tip of his knife rolled it in the pale gold grass to rub off the tiny spines. Then carefully handling it, he peeled off the thick outer coating to leave the light green seedy tuna ready to eat. Each of us had one; and after our long ride were grateful that the golden, lotus-like blossoms had ripened to

rather than breaking a horse. Once he "gen'led" too thoroughly, in the case of the big sorrel mare Manzanita. He used to let her plod along at a snail's pace and occasionally crop a tempting bunch of alfalfa or grass wherever she pleased. As a result, she grew to be the size of a cow and then became sick — so sick, in fact, it was thought that she would die. But Manzanita got well and even larger. Cuate's version of the story: "Manzanita, she got sick, oh, awful sick. Then something inside busted in her; yes, ma'am, some of her insides busted; an' that's what makes her so fat. An' then she got well. She's never sick no more."

When Cuate began riding Manzanita again, she was so fat she held the saddle badly. He used to call her "Bah-loon". We would meet him coming around a bend in the road, talking in a soothing, low mono-

rolling a cigarette with one hand. But unlike domineering old Jose, Lugo was a very gentle man. Though he excelled in horsemanship and roping, his was not a disposition to direct others. Riding through canyons and hillsides of cottonwood, ironwood and oak up to the bare ridgepoles, he issued his orders as *mayordomo*; but the vaqueros openly disregarded him. Then soft-spoken Lugo, this vaquero of undisputed skill, sitting on his horse between earth and sky, would weep that his orders were disobeyed. Tears in a leader do not bring obedience, so Lugo, who is still named among the great vaqueros, came no more to the Island roundups after that, though his son is a steady worker there now.

And now Guelo must be mentioned, for though he is not a first-rate vaquero he is a reliable worker and an excellent shearer. He is now somewhat over 70 but is uncertain about the exact number of years. He first came to the Island at the age of 12, before my grandfather acquired it. Education was not compulsory, and it was not unusual for a boy to start work in his early teens. However, he told my cousin Justy that he had attended school up to the third grade. He had learned to spell "cat" and "rat". With a twig he laboriously traced the letters in the smooth ground near the saddle racks between the stable and saddle shop. Then his face, open as a child's, crumpled into puzzled wrinkles. "But which one is 'cat'?" he asked.

Guelo used to tell of the old days when wild cattle roamed from the flats of Cueva Valdez westward to the Punta del Oeste. They must have been the last of a herd introduced by the Barron Company before The Santa Cruz Island Company acquired the Island. My grandfather exterminated them, replacing them with purebred Shorthorns.

Once Guelo was sitting on the bench in front of the bunkhouse, talking over the old days with a *compadre*. "We used to slaughter the cattle in a canada west of Cueva Valdez," Guelo was remembering, "and jerk the beef there, then pack it into the Main Ranch. The last wild cow was shot in the time of Leopoldo." The old *paisanos* reckoned time at the Island by the superintendent in charge at the period of their recollection.

"No," interrupted the other oldtimer, "it was in the time of Moullet."

Guelo's guileless face became earnest and he spoke emphatically: "Well, then Moullet must have been a liar because the last one shot was in the time of Leopoldo." There the disagreement ended.

Guelo is not the happy-go-lucky, improvident type of a number of his *compadres*. In town every Sunday he attends the



A pencil sketch of vaquero R. Romo on Santa Cruz Island, 1932.

church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. At the end of the roundups a benevolent pilgrim's bearded face looks out from under the battered hat.

Of Dominguez I write last because he embodies the best type of worker among the fast-disappearing California vaqueros. A steady, thorough person, very competent and, therefore, sure of himself without conceit, Dominguez can be trusted to do his work well all the time. He is splendid with the *reata*, which he throws with a graceful ease of action and seldom misses his mark. Silent and dignified, Dominguez is unique, with none of the loquacity of most of his *compadres*. Once in awhile he tells of the glorious old days when there were no fences on the ranges, of when the vaqueros got up in the black of morning to get the wild cattle at waterholes. But usually he goes about his business, hour upon hour, with scarcely an uttered word, yet neither withdrawn nor unfriendly. Does he have long, long thoughts of the past? Does he know he is

among the last of the vaqueros in California? In his reserve there is something monumental and ancient.



From author to reader: When I first sketched these six oldtimers who rode for decades on our Santa Cruz Island ranch, three were dead, one was too aged to ride and only the last two were still active vaqueros. These were the thinning ranks of the elders who remembered *el tiempo antiguo* — the olden times. Many, many years they rode the historic trails. Now who is left to remember? —HC

Helen Caire, now living in San Francisco, has also written "A Brief History of Santa Cruz Island from 1869 to 1937", *Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly* (Summer, 1982) and "Christmas at Santa Cruz Island", *Noticias*, Santa Barbara Historical Society (Winter, 1983).